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THE REV. JOHN SHUCK,
SOUTHMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
MINISTER

PHOTO BY SARAH HANSELL

The Rev. John Shuck talks with Street Roots in his office at Southminster Presbyterian Church in Beaverton.

Christianity's subversive tradition

John Shuck, a pastor who believes God is a product of mythology, frames the Christmas story as one of resistance

BY SARAH HANSELL
STAFF WRITER

The Rev. John Shuck doesn't believe in God. But that doesn't mean he doesn't consider himself a Christian.

Shuck, who has been a Presbyterian minister for 25 years, is the pastor at Southminster Presbyterian Church in Beaverton.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, Shuck sat down with Street Roots in his office at Southminster to talk about what it looks like to be a minister who doesn't believe in God, his own journey to the ministry, and how the subversive tradition of the "Radical Jesus" can inform resistance today during the Trump era.

"Christianity, and there are different kinds of Christianity, but the main one that most people know is about believing stuff," Shuck said. "You believe things about Jesus, things about God, things about the Bible, all that kind of thing. Well, when things happen in science, and those beliefs really are no longer credible in a literal sense, what happens? Well, churches tend to put a ceiling on that, and my ministry always has been to break the ceiling."

Shuck grew up as an evangelical Baptist and broke away from it in high school. He didn't return to Christianity until he was an adult working as a professional radio announcer when he followed his wife into a Presbyterian church in Auburn, Wash. The minister there ultimately inspired him to pursue a career in Presbyterian ministry.

"One of his first sermons was about evolution in a positive way," Shuck said. "I grew up hearing that was a bad thing. He was from South Africa, and he had worked hard in helping dismantle apartheid. So there was a

social justice element right there that attracted me. I felt that going into ministry was a way to deal with things that were honest and true – and also social justice. It was a place where those sorts of questions could be addressed. And I found that to be true in many ways."

He attended Princeton Seminary in New Jersey and went on to serve at four churches over the next 25 years, landing at Southminster four years ago.

Shuck believes that in the face of science, commonly accepted Christian beliefs don't hold up: that God is a supernatural force or being, Jesus rose from the dead, the Bible is a divine revelation and an afterlife awaits the dead.

Instead, he believes that the Bible is a human product, that religion is a human construct, and that Christianity is a culture that draws upon symbolism and tradition to create meaning in the present.

In Southminster, Shuck found a church with progressive ideologies and a social justice consciousness that was already challenging traditional ideas of Christianity and what is acceptable within it.

"I think what happens is the church oftentimes escapes," Shuck said. "It gets controlled by conservative forces, and it becomes a repository for conservative social mores. But there's also a subversive tradition in it. And that's what I saw when you asked me about what Southminster is. I saw that there, and my congregation I've served, too, has been that way. Not all (churches) are. There are few that take the lead on issues of social justice."

Shuck finds and emphasizes resistance against oppression in many Bible stories that are not commonly thought of as being rooted in

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social justice. As Christmas approaches, Shuck reframes the birth of Jesus within this subversive tradition.

The Christmas story starts with Mary, Jesus' mother, and Joseph, her husband, looking for room at the inn because they needed to be counted by the Roman Empire for the census. What is rarely emphasized in this Christmas story is that the occasion for Mary and Joseph's trek to Bethlehem was because they, as natives of the land, were occupied by the Roman empire and subject to Roman rule.

"The whole story is based right within oppression itself," Shuck said. "Both of these Christmas narratives, both in (the books of the Bible) Matthew and Luke, come out of a recognition that we are occupied. And we don't ever hardly ever talk about that as Christmas. We don't even read our own texts. We mix them together and make them be magical.

"And magic is good; it's nice to have that sense in which the veil between the sacred and divine is thin, and Christmas night has that to it. But we also have to remember that we are

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